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Plot on Pope: Bulgaria Tie?

On Basis of Evidence, Answer Is Not Known

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ROME, Dec. 29 — Did the Turkish gunman who shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, act on the orders of the Bulgarian secret police? If he did, was it at the behest of the

K.G.B., headed at the time by Yuri V. Andropov, now the Soviet party leader?

News
Analysis

Neither question, in the forefront of governmental, journalistic and public discussion in Italy and elsewhere, can be answered on the basis of the evidence now available.

But if it turns out that the Bulgarian secret police guided the actions of Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman serving a life sentence after one of the most rapid trials in Italian judicial history since World War II, then, it is generally believed, the ultimate responsibility rests with Moscow.

Nothing in the history of postwar Bulgaria points to an appreciable measure of independence from the Soviet Union, particularly not in foreign affairs. Political, diplomatic and intelligence experts in non-Communist countries hold it to be inconceivable that Bulgarian secret agents would have undertaken so portentous an assignment as the assassination of the Pope except on express orders of the Soviet Union.

It is also a matter of common belief among Western secret services that Bulgaria has rendered aid to the Soviet K.G.B. in general espionage and "dirty-trick" activities in Western and pro-Western countries and has not hesitated to order its agents to kill "enemies" on foreign soil.

In addition, European intelligence and police officials are certain that considerable amounts of heroin from Western Asia reach Western Europe via Bulgaria and assume that a country that so fully controls all phases of life within its borders cannot be unaware of this transit traffic, much of it in Turkish trucks. They assume, therefore, that minimally this trade has Bulgarian tolerance, if not approval.

Bulgaria is also reputed to be a major market for illegal arms dealing. Israeli intelligence sources reported that the Bulgarian port of Varna handled 80 percent of a large flow of Communist arms to Palestine Liberation Organization camps in Lebanon. Many arms seized from terrorist groups throughout Europe, including Turkey, are reported to have originated in Soviet-bloc countries and to have reached the terrorists via their Palestinian friends.

There are many questions that would have to be answered before the establishment of any direct link between the Soviet Union and the attempt to assassinate the Pope. One is what the Soviet motivation for such an attempt would be. Unanimity among those who believe that if Bulgaria engineered the plot then the Soviet Union is ultimately responsible declines drastically on the question of motivation.

It is generally agreed that the Pope exercised extraordinary influence in rousing the majority of Poles to confront their regime openly and provoke the most serious threat to the Soviet hold over its Eastern European satellites since the Czechoslovak "spring" of 1968.

But many professional political and intelligence analysts question whether the murder of the Pope would have significantly weakened the movement led by the Solidarity trade union, which was at its peak in May 1981. They doubt even more that the Soviet Union, which they consider cautious in international affairs, would have taken so great a risk as plotting a political assassination of Shakespearean magnitude, entrusting its execution to a 23-year-old Turkish terrorist of doubtful emotional stability and doing so when the chances of his falling into the hands of the Italian police, on crowded St. Peter's Square, were far better than even.

A Matter of Allegation

It is also noted that subsequent events proved that the Soviet Union had entirely Polish means at its disposal to solve the Polish issue without attempting to do so by so spectacular and risky means as the murder of the Pope.

So far, even the official Bulgarian involvement is only a matter of allegation. The only legal action taken against a Bulgarian citizen was the arrest Nov. 25 of the station chief of Balkan Airlines, Serge Ivanov Antonov, at his office here. His detention was ordered by Judge Ilario Martella, the magistrate investigating the question of whether Mr. Agca had acted alone, as he had contended, or had the support of accomplices. Mr. Antonov was detained on suspicion of "active complicity." Under Italian law, criminal cases are prepared by an investigative magistrate who then rules on whether or not the evidence is strong enough to warrant a trial.

Mr. Martella's "active complicity" as well as on all other aspects of the inquiry. But members of the Government of Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, yielding to mounting pressure from the public and the press, appeared before the Chamber of Deputies on Dec. 20 to state the official view for the first time.

2 Others Under Investigation

What emerged from the daylong debate, in which four ministers reported to the Chamber and replied to questions, was a clear Government belief that Judge Martella's actions were based on substantive information, although no sources were disclosed. The ministers also said that not only Mr. Antonov but two members of the Bulgarian Embassy staff would have been detained by Judge Martella if they had not been covered by diplomatic immunity.

Justice Minister Clelio Darida said that the two continued to be under investigation, although they have returned to Bulgaria. He named them as Zhelyo Kolev Vassilev and Todor Stoyanov Aivazov. Bulgaria identified Mr. Vassilev as an army major who served as secretary to the military attaché here and Mr. Aivazov as head of the embassy's financial section.

As Judge Martella had done earlier in his only statement since Mr. Antonov's arrest — which loosed a wave of circumstantial reports in the Italian press and broadcasting without attribution to sources — Mr. Darida, Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo and Interior Minister Virginio Rognoni limited their assertions of a Bulgarian link to the attempt on the Pope's life to Bulgarian individuals. An aide of the Justice Minister repeated in response to a question on Tuesday that the Government was not accusing the Bulgarian Government.

'An Act of War'

Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio accused the Soviet Union, without naming it, of committing "an act of war" by choosing to assassinate the Pope rather than invading Poland. Mr. Lagorio did not elaborate on the sources that provided him with the information on such a Soviet dilemma.

The minister also reported that coded radio traffic between Bulgaria and Italy rose sharply at the time of the attempt on the Pope's life, as well as during last year's kidnapping by the Red Brigades of Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier of the United States Army, and said that this suggested the activation of "sleep" agents. In line with assertions depicting Bulgaria as a center of espionage and arms and narcotics smuggling, Mr. Colombo hinted at visa restrictions on Bulgarians and expulsions of Bulgarian Embassy staff members.

But the parliamentary debate did not produce any additional specifics on a Bulgarian-run plot on the Pope's life. The only known facts are these:

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